Afghanistan – Don’t Look Away: A Crisis for the Whole of Humanity

written by Kevin B. Anderson | September 21, 2021

Protest for women’s rights in Kabul on Sept. 3.
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The defeat of the U.S. and the seizure of power by the Taliban mark a real turning point. This reveals both imperialism and fundamentalism as obstacles to human emancipation at a time when Afghan women are leading the resistance.

Not the Same as the Fall of Saigon

The sudden collapse of the U.S.-supported Afghan government has left the ultra-fundamentalist Taliban in charge of the entire country, at least for now. For twenty years, the U.S. occupation propped up a nominally democratic but utterly corrupt kleptocracy and a military with 300,000 troops, at least on paper, with the support of local and U.S. air power. In addition to tens of thousands of U.S. ground troops, allied countries like the UK, Germany, France, Canada, Australia, Netherlands also sent substantial forces in the early years. Despite this, and in defiance of all estimates of the strength of forces on the ground, some 50,000 lightly-armed Taliban fighters seized the entire country in a series of lighting offensives in August, the most humiliating defeat for Washington since the fall of Saigon in 1975.

At the outset though, it is necessary to state that the kind of forces that defeated the United States in 1975 were entirely different from the Taliban. While the Vietnamese National Liberation Front was certainly Stalinist and hardly socialist humanist, it nonetheless represented a national liberation movement led by the country’s most popular nationalist leader, Ho Chi Minh, who had been leading the anticolonial struggle for 40 years. The NLF upheld women’s equality (many of their combat troops were women), free education for all, and land reform. And at least on paper, it opposed discrimination against oppressed minorities, although it soon reneged on this promise. In contrast, the Taliban openly state that they intend to make women second-class citizens, that they will discriminate against religious and ethnic minorities like the mainly Shia Hazara community, and that they will do nothing to change property relations.

Some similarities do exist, however, between the South Vietnamese regime propped up by the U.S. and the Afghan regime it installed and supported for 20 years at a cost of more than $2 trillion. As in Vietnam, huge stocks of the latest U.S. weapons were left behind. But the Afghan regime was even

more brittle than the South Vietnamese one, which held out for several years — even after the U.S. withdrew most of its ground troops — before collapsing in 1975. It at least had something of a social base in the relatively privileged Catholic minority that had been favored by French colonialism in a predominantly Buddhist country.

The U.S.-Installed Karzai-Ghani Regime

The Afghan regime, directly installed by Washington, never developed a social base of any kind. It existed mainly through lavish U.S. funding. This led to huge profits for U.S. "defense" contractors. The Karzai-Ghani regime depended upon a number of local warlords, most of whose forces originated as parts of the fundamentalist mujahideen who fought against Russian occupation during the 1980s, with support from the United States, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia. In this sense, the regime was deeply Islamist too, though not as extremely so as the fanatical Taliban. This meant that most of the non-Taliban factions with real power, i.e., with control of arms and militias, were at best "moderate" Islamists (Bruno Philip, "Les talibans, stricts 'imitateurs' du Prophète," *Le Monde*, September 9, 2021). This could be seen in the constitution, in the court system, and in administration at local levels. In addition, these warlords and the other arms of the Afghan government were notoriously corrupt. Examples include schools paid for but never built and the pervasive "ghost battalions" of the Afghan army where there were no soldiers but the money was siphoned off by officers.

At a broader level, the massive poverty endemic to the rural areas, inhabited by over 70% of the population, not only failed to lessen but actually increased under the U.S.-installed regime. Added to this were the incessant bombings and military raids in rural areas by U.S. forces targeting Taliban but often hitting civilians. (Anand Gopal reports in heartrending detail on this in a manner surprisingly uncritical of the Taliban in his "The Other Afghan Women," *New Yorker*, September 6. 2021.) The whole world witnessed an example of this, for once visible because it occurred in the heart of Kabul in broad daylight at a time when the international media had gathered to witness the final U.S. withdrawal: An August 29 U.S. drone attack on a supposed ISIS target instead killed 10 civilians, among them seven children. These kinds of attacks, persisting for years, created an atmosphere of despair and hopelessness in which economic privation played no small part. As Gallup reported on a poll it conducted that sampled the entire population in 2018, "Afghans' ratings of their own lives are lower than any other population's worldwide," adding, "Almost no Afghans see their economic situation improving anytime soon" (Steve Crabtree, "Afghans' Misery Reflected in Record-Low Well-Being Measures," *Gallup*, October 26, 2018).

The August 2021 regime collapse, although sudden in its final form, was a long time coming. The U.S. government realized it had been defeated at least by 2020, as the Trump administration agreed to a total U.S. withdrawal in direct negotiations with the Taliban. The Biden administration continued this policy, which had two basic aspects: the United States would withdraw by the end of August 2021 and the Taliban would not attack U.S. forces during the period of withdrawal. Both sides kept the bargain, with no involvement on the part of the Afghan people or the Ghani government, with the latter not even included in the negotiations.

The Taliban: Past, Present, and Future

Who are the Taliban? Without detailing their history, which is generally known, let me quote Middle East scholar Juan Cole on their relationship to Islam as a whole:

"In my view, the Taliban resemble the Ku Klux Klan. *New York Times* journalist David Sanger complained when I said that, saying that the Taliban took over a whole country and the KKK is a fringe. But I'd just like to point out that the KKK had enormous influence in the Democratic Party in

the 1920s and that it took over the state of Indiana for a while in the 1920s, having the governor, a majority of the state assembly, and 250,000 cadre members. And today's KKK was an important constituency for Trumpism and influential on the former guy's policies."

"What I would say about the Taliban is that they are an outlier in the Muslim world. The old Taliban had been formed in seminaries of the Deoband school of Islam. I think of Deobandis as sort of like Haredim or ultra-Orthodox among Jews. The school developed in British colonial India and was a way for Indian Muslims to assert their identities against British Christian rule and the Hindu majority. It is a sectarian movement and the vast majority of Indian Muslims rejected it. Its seminaries in northern Pakistan attracted Saudi funding, and so some seminaries mixed Deobandi teachings with some ideas from the hard line, rigid Saudi Wahhabi movement. But the Taliban were also the result of the chaos and violence of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan" ("Taliban 'Islam' versus the Islam of the Prophet Muhammad and the Qur'an," *Informed Comment*, August 18, 2021).

In power from 1996-2001, the Taliban barred women from any participation in school or in work outside the home and imposed the austere burqa, executed "impure" women and gay men, killed many members of the Shia Hazara community, and blew up the majestic Bamiyan statues of Buddha, one of the world's great cultural heritage sites — on the grounds that the statues represented a false religion based on "idolatry." They also banned music and have done so again.

Since the Taliban seized power in August, they have issued contradictory statements and engaged in equally contradictory actions. Some of this can probably be attributed to duplicity, a calculated delay in introducing their harshest ideas and measures until they have consolidated their power. But some of this is a reflection of real disagreements within the group itself, as seen in the September 14 row at the national palace between two factions, after their chief diplomat Mullah Abdel Barodar seems to have lost a power struggle to the even more fundamentalist Haqqani network. Historically, the latter has had a stronger relationship to Pakistan's fearsome military intelligence organization, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), and to Al Qaeda as well. As is well known, the ISI aided and trained the Taliban before 1996, giving them modern tanks, which led some to quip that they arrived at Kabul in 1996 armed with a lot more than the Quran. The ISI also gave the Taliban refuge in Quetta, Pakistan right up through today, after the U.S. invasion of 2001 drove them from power in the wake of the September 11 attacks by their Al Qaeda allies. This time of course, a huge stock of U.S. weapons has fallen into their hands.

Since taking Kabul in August, the Taliban have begun to bar all women from secondary school and government workplaces, although they have announced that at some future date, they will allow them to return in strictly gender-segregated spaces. There were initial hints that they would set up an "inclusive" government involving people like corrupt former President Hamid Karzai, something some "progressives" who focus exclusively on anti-imperialism were all too happy to credit. But when the interim government was actually announced, it was all old-time hardliners, with nary a woman, a Hazara (c. 10% of the population), or even a Tajik (c. 25%). Instead, they were almost entirely drawn from the Pashtun ethnic group, who represent a plurality of the population (c. 40%), and who have always constituted the Taliban's social base. There were, however, two ministers drawn from the Uzbek minority (c. 10% of the population). Interestingly, the head of the Pakistani ISI, Faiz Hameed, was photographed on his way to meet with the Taliban leadership on September 4, a few days before the new interim government was announced, and was blamed for the elevation of the most reactionary elements. What is clear is that there is no pretense of elections, an Islamic republic, or anything of the sort. Instead, a theocratic-monarchical Islamic "Emirate" is to be established. Will they succeed?

The Afghan People Refuse to Be Silenced

Except in places like their old base in Kandahar, the largest city in the areas where the Pashtun population predominates, there has been at best silence in the wake of the Taliban takeover. Afghanistan in 2021 is not the same as in 1996, with a population that is much more urbanized and cosmopolitan, with millions of educated women and youth, and with a vibrant civil society that developed alongside the U.S. occupation — and the regime it installed — that includes relatively independent media and other cultural institutions.

To take one example, let us listen to Hjalmar Jorge Joffre-Eichhorn, German-Bolivian cultural worker and editor of the recent book, *Lenin150*:

"The yearning at the heart of our theatre activities was a more just, democratic, peaceful, and beautiful Afghanistan for all Afghans, independent of their ethnic group, sex, or religious orientation, and free of constant interference from false friends near and far. Our morale was one of defiance, outrage, and anguish about what at the time were thirty years of uninterrupted war, the havoc it had wreaked on the lives of millions of innocent people, and a culture of impunity sustained by a global alliance of fundamentalist warlords, both so-called Christian and so-called Muslim, whose insatiable hunger for power and money kept feeding the war machine with the bodies of the righteous."

"Yet our spirit was also full of hope and resolve, especially to the extent that our theatre activism began to convert what Dr. Sharif called 'tears into energy'…:

No desire to open my mouth
What should I sing of…?
I, who am hated by life.
No difference to sing or not to sing.
—Nadia Anjuman

It was in those moments of radical fragility that we realized that another Afghanistan was possible, that the theatre could make a unique and powerful contribution to this possibility, and, perhaps most importantly, that the only people capable of carrying out this endlessly obstructed transformation were those Afghan women and men no longer willing to accept that they were born for nothingness; with trapped wings and a sealed mouth, as slain Afghan poet Nadia Anjuman (1980-2005) so hauntingly wrote" ("In Search of Lost Hope: Theatre Against All Odds in Afghanistan," *Howlround Theatre Commons*, May 15, 2018).

Kabul 2021 is a far cry from Kabul 1996. At that time, the population had shrunk to 300,000 amid sieges and rocket attacks. Today, the city has six million inhabitants, while half of the national population was born after 2001. With overstretched military forces of about 50,000 in a country of some 40 million people, it is unclear if the Taliban will be able to take full control very soon, especially with winter coming on and a food crisis looming.

In the days after the Taliban took over Kabul, street protests led by women began and have persisted for weeks. On August 19, some 200 young women and men gathered in the streets of Kabul to protest Taliban policies while waving the national flag that the Taliban has replaced with one evoking their "Islamic Emirate." Taliban soldiers soon arrived, insulted the women as "indecent," and beat up the men, firing on and wounding some of them.

Their struggle is emanating from a sense of anger, despair, and dread. In a poignant interview, Roya Mandegar, a social worker who lives alone as a single woman in Kabul, stated in an incredibly brave interview: "I am an atheist and a feminist. I never stayed at home on March 8 [International Women's Day]. We fought for twenty years so that girls could wear colorful clothing in Kabul. Today the city has become quiet and empty. I am walled into my apartments, which I change regularly. My

heart is burning with distress. All the work of these twenty years was reduced to naught in the space of one night" (Ghazal Golshiri, "A Kaboul, le désespoir de ceux qui restent," *Le Monde*, September 1, 2021).

In smaller cities, the Taliban have tightened the screws more than they have dared to do in Kabul. In the days following the Taliban takeover, the city of Herat saw very few women on the streets without their faces covered, this in what has been one of the country's most liberal and cultured cities. Women students were being prevented from going to the university. Most ominously, black marks were being placed upon homes occupied by Hazaras or single women. (Jacques Follorou and Ghazal Golshiri, "La vie au jour le jour sous la férule talibane," *Le Monde*, August 24, 2021).

But by September 2, resistance broke out in Herat as well, as several dozen women marched through the streets after the Taliban announced that the new government would include no women. They demanded that this policy be reversed, focusing their overall slogans on the right to "education, work, and security" (Sharif Hassan, "Afghan Women Stage Rights Protest After a Taliban Leader's Remark," *New York Times*, September 3, 2021).

On September 4, about a hundred women demonstrators again confronted the Taliban in Kabul. After Taliban soldiers surrounded them and a leader started to order them to disperse over a megaphone, one daring woman briefly snatched away his megaphone. But the Taliban thereupon beat the demonstrators with metal rods and scattered them.

Five days later, in Kabul on September 8, several small rallies protested the interim government's lack of inclusivity, especially its exclusion of women. In one of these actions, demonstrators began their action in the Hazara community: "No women, no Hazara. It's completely wrong." They marched across the city, arguing their way past armed Taliban checkpoints. But as they reached the center of the city, the Taliban set upon them, and did so even more harshly on two male journalists covering the event. These Afghan men were beaten mercilessly, and later showed their scars to the media. On the same day, the Taliban announced it was re-establishing its religious police apparatus, the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and the Suppression of Vice (Nabih Bulos and Marcus Yam, "In Kabul, Women Challenge Taliban," *Los Angeles Times*, September 9, 2021).

The next day, women gathered for a similar protest in Mazar-i-Sharif, a smaller city with a history of opposition to the Taliban, in part due to its cosmopolitan location on the border with Uzbekistan. The small demonstration was kept that way by the Taliban, who cordoned them off immediately, preventing both other women and male supporters from joining in. They then proceeded to arrest the male supporters and some of the women demonstrators. Away from the cameras, one of the women organizers was detained, brutally beaten, and threatened with worse if she talked about it afterwards. According to one report, during the demonstration, "some of the bravest women put their hands on the guns of the Taliban, shouting that without these weapons, they wouldn't be so sure of themselves." Clearly, Afghan women are "the last rampart against the Taliban," as a French journalist reported (Jacques Follorou, "Le femmes, dernier rampart antitaliban," *Le Monde*, September 13, 2021).

The persistent demonstrations by Afghan women and their supporters stand out all the more for two reasons: (1) They are continuing even as the resistance led by some former government ministers and mujahideen commanders in Panjshir Valley seems to have collapsed very rapidly, at least for now. (2) Unlike in Iran in 1979 or Egypt in 2011, women demonstrators and their male supporters in Kabul and Mazar-i-Sharif are facing armed security forces who don't even necessarily speak the local language (Dari or Uzbeki) but not mobs of hostile local men. For in addition to the men who have openly supported them — and remember that most women have already been driven off the streets by Taliban pronouncement — it appears that the urban population, both male and female, is

either indifferent or hostile to their new Taliban rulers.

Where To Now?

Russia, China, and even Iran — and of course the Taliban's longstanding ally Pakistan — have to one degree or another embraced the Taliban's rise to power in the hope of regional stability. For its part, the U.S. government's unstated position is not all that different by now, despite years of fighting the Taliban. First, it is notable just how much care the U.S took to do nothing to antagonize the Taliban in its final months in the country in order to get its own troops out safely. Second, as revealed in an unguarded moment by no less a personage than Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Mark Milley, the biggest fear the U.S. has about the future is not repression of the Afghan people (of course not!) but instability. Evoking the danger of a war between pockets of ISIS and the Taliban inside Afghanistan, Milley opined, "I think there's at least a very good probability of a broader civil war, and that will then in turn lead to conditions that could in fact, lead to reconstitution of al Qaeda or a growth of ISIS" (Carolyn Vakil, "Milley Says Civil War 'Likely' in Afghanistan," *The Hill*, September 4, 2021). Reading between the lines, one could say that the U.S. also wishes any kind of opposition to the Taliban to die down, even progressive opposition.

But longterm "stability" under the Taliban is not very likely. To be sure, they are rooted in the country's largest ethnic group, the Pashtuns, but they are still a minority of the country. Moreover, the Taliban's reactionary ideology is not shared without opposition even inside the socially conservative Pashtun community, let alone a multi-ethnic and increasingly urbanized country. Even if they are able to consolidate their rule over a population so tired of war that any kind of peace might seem in Hobbesian fashion to constitute an acceptable result, they lack the capacity — or even the desire — to bring about improvements in the conditions of life and labor for the population. Overall, the situation is bleak in the immediate term, as Afghanistan is coming under the rule of one of the most retrogressive regimes on earth at a time of food shortages, general economic deprivation, the destruction of war, Covid-19, and severe drought.

At this juncture, it is of paramount importance that the international left, human right groups, feminists, and other progressives not look the other way, but continue to expose the situation and to support as best we can our Afghan brothers and sisters. This means everything from public anti-Taliban and pro-feminist demonstrations as occurred recently in Paris, Los Angeles, and other cities, to the fight for the right of Afghan immigrants and refugees to cross borders and receive our welcome.